

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Dr. Peter Vethanayagamony

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A person visited a bar regularly and had the habit of ordering three beers. After several weeks of noticing this habit, the bartender asked the man why he always orders three beers. The man said, "I have two brothers who have moved away to different countries. We promised each other that as long as we are alive we would always order an extra two beers whenever we drank as a way of keeping up the family bond."

Several weeks later, noticing that the man only ordered two beers, the bartender leaned toward him and whispered, "Please accept my condolences on the death of one of your brothers." The man replied, "You'll be happy to hear that my two brothers are alive and well... It's just that I, myself, have decided to give up drinking for Lent."

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. I do not know what Lent means to you. While some equate Lent with giving up something they dearly love "Lent is a time of fasting, repentance, and preparation for the coming of Easter. Over the next several weeks, we will be meditating on events related to the life of Jesus, his passion on the cross, and his victorious resurrection as recorded in gospels of John and Matthew.

In our Gospel today Christ was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. The test comes at the end of 40 days of fasting, and Jesus was famished.

The primary thrust of the test is for Jesus to use the extraordinary power he has as a result of his status as son of God to turn the desert stones into food; to use his privileged standing to alleviate his own suffering and procure his personal comfort; to direct his power toward the satisfaction of his own bodily needs and desires.

Jesus' refusal of the offer, it seems, is not because he is disdainful of bodily needs and the necessity of food. While he will instruct his audience during his teaching on the mountain not to be anxious about food but trust in the provision of God (6:25-33), he will twice take a few loaves of bread and with it feed thousands of hungry people.

Nor Jesus' refusal of the offer is because he is rigorous in his fasting practices thereby reinforcing his special status; he will later warn people against fasting as a way to increase the appearance and prestige of religious piety (6:16-18).

His response, in Matthew's account, is formulated as a quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Meeting the body's needs, even when those needs are great, is not his ultimate concern.

I suppose it is only in watching how Jesus lived that we get a sense of what living by the word of God meant for him.

Jesus' mission constituted a way of healing, of solidarity with the poor, of challenging the oppressive and unjust structures of social control operating in his day, of opposing social and religious conventions that generated exclusion of the weak and the outcast.

In the end, his mission would lead him to the cross. It is interesting that the phrase "If you are the Son of God," will occur again in Matthew's account. The two bandits crucified with him would say, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

But Jesus instead of employing his power to ensure his own personal well-being and personal comfort, he chose to obey God's plan.

After the first temptation, the devil takes Jesus from the isolation of the desert to the top of the Jerusalem Temple, asking him to jump, quoting a scripture. Still later to the top of the mountain, Jesus would not use his status and privilege to demand special protection, to ensure his own safety.

His mission of solidarity with the least would leave him vulnerable to suffering, affliction, and death and he here accepts this vulnerability and foregoes claiming the protection and safety of his privileged status. Jesus refuses to take up the narrow way of God's kingdom.

Jesus remained true to his mission, even though it would mean encountering hostility, conflict, suffering, torture, and death. The devil was offering Jesus a kingdom but without the cross. What is put to the test is whether Jesus, with the privilege and status of being God's son and the power that attends that status, will stay true to the way of the kingdom. Each of the three temptations invites Jesus to bypass suffering.

Using our privilege and entitlement to ensure our needs and wants are met, guarantee the protection and security of our lives and our way of life, to lever more social, political and economic power constitute great temptations indeed. Increasing personal comfort, security and power is what we are socialized to desire and actively pursue.

The Book of Hebrews tells us that we have a High Priest, Jesus Christ, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet remained without sin (Heb. 4:14-16). This means that our Lord fully understands all that we face in this world. He was tempted in every way, not just in these three temptations at the outset, but throughout his life on earth. Therefore, Hebrews says, we may approach the throne of grace to help in the time of need, trusting in Christ in the times of temptation and trials.

As we find ourselves in our own wilderness, the One who was tempted stands ready to strengthen us and bring us triumphant through all trials. In your own wilderness of temptation may I invite you encounter Jesus in the body broken for you and the blood shed for you. Whatever are our temptations we are not alone. That is the Good News of Jesus Christ for us in this Lenten season and in every season of our lives.

Amen.